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ABSTRACT

A statewide survey of 60 college, high school, community, and private performance halls by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities revealed that most are badly designed and architecturally inflexible. A Council consultant and staffperson personally examined each hall's stage, orchestra pit, dressing rooms, stage-area equipment, lighting, and box office. The survey results, including groundplans and photographs, have helped performers sponsored by the Council to adjust their shows to various facilities' shortcomings, and have also identified good performance halls to serve as models for those currently being built or remodelled. Besides adequate design and equipment, however, performance halls and other cultural facilities in Massachusetts also lack ongoing financing, coordination among facilities owners to avoid overlap or competition, and long-range programmatic, architectural, and financial planning. (RW)

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MAKING THE FACILITY WORK: THE MASSACHUSETTS EXPERIENCE

Address to the Northwest Cultural Facilities Conference
Eugene, Oregon 20 March 1980
Susan S.T. Amory

Thank you. As you can see on the conference agenda, my name is Susan Amory and I am the Research Coordinator for the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities. I am delighted to have the opportunity to come the 3,000 miles from Boston to Eugene because cultural facilities development has been a special concern of mine and the Massachusetts State Arts Council for many years now. The Oregon Arts Commission is to be commended for organizing this conference, which is one of the first to pose the urgent questions confronting all of us who are involved in the development of museums, performance halls, and community cultural centers. Such issues as new contruction vs. renovation, public vs. private financing, "multi-purpose" vs. single-use halls --- these are concerns that have bearing on professionals in many fields, including city and regional planners, federal and state funding agencies, and ultimately, the performers and audiences whom these facilities are meant to serve.

It is this last factor that I want to stress in giving you the Massachusetts Arts Council's perspective and experience in the area of cultural facilities design and development. I hope that this brief review of some of the successes and failures that we have seen in Massachusetts, particularly in performance facilities, will illustrate how programmatic, architectural, and financial planning determine how well a facility works for performer and audience.

The Council has been aware of the inadequacy of Massachusetts performance facilities for some time now. Despite Boston's claim to the title, "the Athens of America," it is no secret that this city, which celebrates its 350th birthday this year, is woefully lacking adequate performance space for resident and touring companies. Until twnety years ago, the Boston Opera House presided over Huntingdon Avenue, a cultural boulevard connecting such venerable institutions as the Boston Public Library, the former Museum of Natural History, Horticultural Hall, Symphony Hall, the Museum of Fine Arts and the Isabella Stewart Gardiner Museum, all linked by the "Emerald Necklace," a chain of public parks designed by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. In 1958, the Opera House, with its impressive stage and backstage area, opulent boxes and balconies, was demolished in an urban renewal project to make way for the construction of Northeastern University. Of course, hindsight is perfect, and it has been apparent for many years now that the loss of the Opera House created an irreparable vacuum of performance facilities in Boston --- until recently, Sarah Caldwell's renowned Opera Company shared a dilapidated, rat-infested movie house with a hard rock concert series. For years, the Bolshoi Ballet has skipped Boston on its U.S. tours because the available stages are too shallow to accomodate the fantastic leaps and tour jetes which are the company's hallmark. And the annual Metropolitan Opera tour is still reduced to performing in a cavernous convention hall designed to house auto shows.

We at the Council became really concerned when we realized that problematic performance facilities are widespread across the Commonwealth. Like many other state arts agencies, we have supported touring by performing arts companies since the Council's founding in 1965. In the course of administering such

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National Endowment for the Arts programs as Dance Touring and Artists-in-Residence and then through the early development of the New England Touring Program and the Massachusetts Touring Program, we have witnessed first-hand the problems confronting company tour managers who often must adapt lighting plots or even choreography to fit the architectural and technical limitations of a high school cafetorium or a town hall. In some instances, the Council has had to mediate between irate performing companies and obdurate sponsors in disagreements over the condition of equipment or the absence of dressing rooms that were stipulated in the contract --- disagreements that often led to hours of confusion, thousands of dollars in additional expenses, and unfortunate ill-will between performing group and sponsor. It became painfully apparent that we in the state arts office knew far too little about the actual condition of performing arts facilities in Massachusetts. Therefore, in 1976, the Council conducted a survey of sixty active and potentially active facilities across the Commonwealth, in an effort to help touring companies find adquate perfromance space and sponsors identify and meet the crucial design and technical requirements of those companies.

We were extremely fortunate to draw on the expertise of Beverly Emmons, a Massachusetts native who had gotten her first taste for stage lighting as a high school student at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in the Berkshire hills of western Massachusetts. She then went on to become the tour manager for Merce Cunningham, and lighting designer for such shows as Einstein on the Beach, The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas, and The Elephant Man, for which she received a Tony nomination last year. Her extensive experience in dance and theatre touring around the world had convinced her of the great need for accurate and consistent information on performance facilities in advance of planning a tour, so that a company could negotiate realistic rental contracts and modify its productions to fit particular facilities, if necessary. As founding partner of the TAG Foundation in New York City, she had already sponsored an informal clearinghouse for technical questionnaires used by company tour managers when scouting potential performance sites. What TAG had collected at random, we proposed to carry out systematically, and thus Massachusetts became the first state in the country to conduct a detailed, consistent survey of the actual condition of its performance facilities.

The 11-page questionnaire that we developed is simply a variation of the basic "tech sheet" used by most touring managers when planning a tour. With it, we collected detailed measurements and descriptions of the stage, wing and fly space, rigging, drapery, lighting and sound equipment, dressing rooms, box office, and even whether a working iron was available for last minute costume touch-ups. The completed questionnaire, ¼"-scale groundplans, and Polaroid photographs are the nucleus of the Council's extensive files on each of the sixty facilities surveyed, and these form the basis of our facilities referrals for performing companies and sponsors.

The surveyed sites were selected carefully to encompass the broad range of active facilities found across the Commonwealth, from Provincetown on the tip of Cape Cod to the westernmost hill towns of the Berkshires. We surveyed 24 college and university drama centers, 17 school cafetoriums, 9 civic and community centers, and 10 traditional theatres, including several former vaudeville houses in various degrees of decaying splendor. If there is one aspect of our survey methodology that I would emphasize, it is this --- each site was surveyed in person by Beverly Emmons and a Council staff member. The two-and-one-half hours spent in each facility checking the number of working dimmers on the light board, measuring wing space, and timing crossover time from stage right to stage left, were essential for the accuracy of the survey. Time and again, we at the Council

have heard performing companies complain about the horrible sinking sensation of dismay when looking at a facility which does not even remotely resemble the glowing description given on the tech questionnaire or over the phone. In the course of the project, I was surprised by how often, even in the most active facilities, staff would either answer basic questions inaccurately or not at all. Facilities described to me over the phone as "fully-equipped with a grid, and stage rigging" often turned out to feature a 12-foot proscenium which framed permanently hung strip lights chained to a 14-foot ceiling.

And this was only one of many design disasters that we discovered during the survey. Some of the following examples of poor facilities planning may also be common in the Northwest states and I urge anyone in the audience who is building or renovating a facility to keep these crucial design elements in mind.

* First, as those of you present who have run a theatre know all too well, the box office is the site of that most important of financial activities, ticket sales! An adequate bos office can be locked, has a separate telephone line, ticket racks for arranging reserved seat tickets, and a cash drawer or safe to keep money secure and out of sight. Of the sixty active facilities we surveyed, 33 had either an insecure box office or no box office at all, portable or otherwise. Also, more than half of the facilities surveyed had no central telephone number for the public to call, nor any system for selling reserved seats in advance. These facilities were not designed for optimum ticket control, thus making adequate financial management and accounting impossible. Furthermore, there is substantial risk that the money collected for performances in these thirty-three halls may be stolen or lost.

* Dressing rooms are vital to performers well-being and peace of mind. After weeks of Holiday Inns and Best Westerns, it is not surprising that many performers will spend most of their free time here when on tour. We found that only forty of the sixty facilities surveyed had dressing rooms of any type, and most of these offered only the most rudimentary of amenities. In the high schools we surveyed, the gymnasium locker rooms offered the best features, with sinks, mirrors, toilets, and that simple pleasure which is so often overlooked --- showers. Unfortunately, these were usually off-limits for outside performing companies renting the facility.

* Thirdly, the stage area. Ideally, the fly loft above the stage, where draperies, scenery, and lighting instriuments are hung, should be three times the height of the proscenium so that scenery can be hauled out of the audience's view during a scene change. The grid, from which the mechanics of the fly system are suspended, should have enough fly space to provide the greatest flexibility for the stage lighting and the hanging painted fabric drops which can substitute for costly lumber and skilled carpentry. The elimination of fly loft, grid, and fly system is usually a cost-cutting decision made during the design process. Although doing without an adequate fly loft might save initial building costs, it limits severely the type of show that can use the facility and, in the long run, forces operators and rentors into higher expenditures for scenery construction. Of the facilities we surveyed, half of them had no grid, and only a low ceiling over the stage. And to make matters worse, a quarter of these facilities were afflicted with an inflexible, "dead-hung" fly system, that is, the pipes over the stage were permanently installed, and thus could not be moved up and down nor rearranged to meet the lighting or scenery requirements of a production.

* Massachusetts is known for its fine music ensembles, yet fewer than half of the sixty facilities had a pit or any modified structural arrangement for accomodating an orchestra. Although some facilities had enough space for musicians' chairs between the front row and the stage, this solution does not offer the good access, visibility and acoustics which characterize a properly designed orchestra pit. Several facilities had installed electrically controlled band shells for onstage music performances. While these can serve as reflecting panels to throw sound out into the auditorium, they are cumbersome to store and operate, and certainly are more expensive than a simple, old-fashioned pit.

* In recent years, lighting has become a very sophisticated aspect of the performing arts and the different art disciplines have evolved special lighting techniques. For example, an actor's face should be lit from the front of the auditorium, at 45 degree up and 45 degrees to the left and right. A dancer, on the other hand, needs light primarily from the side of the stage to define the roundness of the body in space. Musicians cannot tolerate lighting from any of these angles --- it must come from above, so that it illuminates the sheet music and doesn't blind them when they are watching the conductor. To accomodate these various needs, a lighting system must be flexible. Usually, traditional theatres are rented on a "four wall" contract, with lighting equipment rented from outside supply companies for each specific show. This means that each production gets exactly the type of equipment that it needs and eliminates the storage and maintenance costs for expensive and specialized equipment for the facility manager. However, with the exception of three abandoned vaudeville houses, all of the facilities we surveyed had some sort of in-house lighting system already installed. A quarter of these systems were adequately flexible, with sufficient, well-maintained equipment. Another quarter offered minimal in-house equipment but could easily accomodate extra rented lighting instruments and dimmer boards. But unfortunately, half of the facilities had permanently installed red-white-and blue border lights and no system for hanging additional rental equipment.

I could go on citing specific problem areas that we discovered in Massachusetts performance facilities, but it should be clear from the few examples that I've given that very few facilities are well designed and equipped for performing arts events, whether resident or touring. This was not always the case. Like most of this country, Massachusetts once enjoyed a thriving vaudeville circuit. Old vaudeville houses still stand in many cities and towns across the Commonwealth, particularly in the old mill towns. Some are abandoned, others operate as movie houses, and a lucky few are carefully restored to present live performances.

The seven former vaudeville theatres that we surveyed share common elements of traditional, flexible theatre architecture, including a proscenium stage, a grid and fly system, and a horse-shoe-shaped auditorium with one or two balconies. When these theatres were active fifty or sixty years ago, a show touring from Boston to Springfield to Albany could assume with confidence that they would be performing in the same type of facility in every town, with comfortable dressing rooms, lots of wing space and crossover corridor for speedy entrances and exits, and even a professional in-house staff to help set up, run, and strike the production. Today, most of the active performing arts facilities in Massachusetts, and 53 of the 60 that we surveyed,were built in the last forty-five years. These facilities were designed for specific community uses, such as local government meetings, neighborhood recreation, and student drama centers in schools and universities. And this specific narrowness is the root of these facilities' fatal inflexibility (forgive the alliteration). For example, one school which we surveyed once had had a strong music program and consequently built a proscenium stage that could accomodate an entire chorus. Ten years later, the

chorus is defunct and the community is saddled with a badly proportioned auditorium where the proscenium is 50' wide and 12' high.

The inflexibility in Massachusetts facilities is worsened by the fact that each facility is inflexible in its own peculiar way. Unlike the traditionally designed vaudeville theatres, the only common characteristic among these recent community auditoriums is their departure from any uniform design and equipment. They have no standard stage dimensions, seating arrangements, technical equipment, or staff. This means that without careful and minute planning, touring companies cannot predict whether the light plot, the staging, or the sound equipment will fit into each of the facilities in which they are scheduled to perform.

Most of the architectural inflexibility which I've described is, quite simply, the result of poor planning, and we see this even in those facilities built in the last ten years. Far too often, a facility is planned and designed from front-row center, with attention lavished on the lobby and auditorium, and little thought given to the areas where performers and stage technicians work. My favorite illustration of this short-sightedness is a certain regional high school built several years ago in an old mill town south of Boston. This impressive, multi-million dollar project included several large buildings connected by external, overhead walkways. One of these massive wings houses the Fine Arts complex,with an excellent performance hall where touring opera, music, and dance companies frequently appear. The school board and the architect neglected one essential detail --- the loading door into the auditorium is on the second floor and there is no ramp. There are two methods for getting stage sets and equipment into that auditorium --- a company and sponsor can carry each piece up a narrow winding staircase or they can hire a fork-lift to hoist heavy equipment to the second floor door. But that's not all --- a semi-truck carrying equipment can just barely clear those connecting overhead walkways. Once it's unloaded, the truck springs back up and is trapped. This kind of oversight is inexcusable and on at least one occasion, was the cause of a fistfight between a large dance company's technical crew and the high school custodians.

I don't want to point a disparaging finger at only the high schools. In general, we found that Massachusetts colleges and universities offer the best designed and equipped facilities, but unfortunately, they are ususally filled with student productions and are not often available to outside groups. And I regret to say that our survey of two Massachusetts state universities revealed incredible architectural problems which performing companies appearing in these halls must regularly overcome. One theatre offers an orchestra pit, a deep stage with a good grid, but minimal wing space, so that a dancer can't run offstage without slamming into a brick wall. Another state facility decided to forego an orchestra pit in favor of a large concert shell which swings down from the ceiling on a hydraulic system. Unfortunately, it takes four trained and paid men over an hour to put this band shell into place.

Now, these inflexible, eccentric facilities are regularly used by local and touring companies. Performers are creative people who often can overcome seemingly insurmountable limitations if they have accurate information about a facility in advance. With our facilities study, the Council has been able to help performing companies get that information and avert the horrible surprises raised by the architectural and technical problems that I've touched on.

And not only has the Massachusetts facilities study minimized problems in existing facilities, but it is serving a purpose which, to my mind, is of even greater long-range importance. Because the study identifies model facilities in the state, it provides guidlines for communities and organizations which

are planning to renovate or build new performance facilities. And in this inflation-ridden period, when construction costs and interest rates are rising every day, there are nearly thirty new performance facilities, museums, and community cultural centers on the drawing board in cities and towns across Massachusetts. This is a remarkable number for a state where the longest driving distance is two-and-a-half hours. The scope and character of these projects are as diverse as the institutions and activities which these facilities will house. They range from a 19th-century town library modestly restored as a visual and performing arts center for the rural communities in Franklin County, to the costly rehab of two former Boston vaudeville houses --- the Savoy Theatre, rescued from Grade B Kungfu movies to become the new home of the Opera Company of Boston, and the Metropolitan Center at the Music Hall, which plans to expand the shallow 27' stage so that large-scale performing companies can tour in Boston.

The financing of these facilities is also diverse. Some communities have allocated HUD funds for local performance facilities development. For example, on the North Shore, Newburyport has used CDBG funds to conduct a feasibility study for a performing arts center in a restored wharf neighborhood. Nearby Salem has donated a handsome Federal-period brick mansion to a new resident theatre company, along with a $90,000 matching grant from HUD's Small Cities Program. On the outermost tip of Cape Cod, the historic Provincetown Playhouse, where Eugene O'Neill produced Long Days Journey into the Night, burnt to the ground three years ago. Using funds from the NEA's Design Demonstration program, which you'll be hearing more about after the cofee break, the Playhouse held a "charette" competition, inviting architects to submit plans for a new theatre. The competition produced an award-winning design and has proven such a successful model that the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center has announced a similar design competition for its own new quarters. Massachusetts museums have not been idle either. The Boston Children's Museum and the Museum of Transportation have worked closely with the Boston Redevelopment Authority to finance the renovation of their new joint home in an old Boston wharf warehouse. After the city designated the waterfront neighborhood a "CARD" or Commercial Area Revitalization District, the museums raised $3.2 million through an Industrial Revenue Bond issue. The Museum of Fine Arts has matched an NEA Challenge Grant and has broken ground for its new wing designed by I.M. Pei. And MIT has just been awarded NEA Challenge Grant for its proposed Center for Advanced Visual Arts and Media Studies, a multi-million dollar project which will also be designed by Pei.

I wish that I could be more sanguine about these exciting cultural facilities development projects, but their sheer number raises issues which are of grave concern to the Council. First, these major capital fund drives are not only competing with one another for the philanthropic dollar but also with Massachusetts hospitals and private college and universities, many of which have launched major capital fund drives of their own in the last few years. Last year, the Associated Foundation of Greater Boston estimated that current capital fund drives in Boston alone were seeking over $94 million. To ease the squeeze for capital funds for cultural facilities, the Council has filed legislation to establish two new state funding programs recommended by the Council's Task Force on Public Financing for the Arts and Humanities. The first bill establishes facilities support through tax-exempt revenue bonds, which will provide financially sound instituitons with a means of borrowing low-interest funds from the private market for major capital construction. Given current interest rates, an institution could save as much as $175,000 annually on a $5 million capital project. The second bill will establish a community cultural facilities fund which would provide matching grants to localities for the acquisition, rehabilitation, or expansion of cultural facilities

These proposed capital funding programs are important but they do not address the larger question of support. Like it or not, this country is a long way off from the cultural patronage systems exemplified by Germany and France, where cultural institutions are government owned and operated and administrators and performers are civil servants. Ultimately, Massachusetts' cultural facilities development projects must be supported by private money, through tax-deductible donations and ticket sales and gate receipts once the facility opens its doors. And it is not certain that there is enough private money in Massachusetts --- first, to pay for the construction of the proposed facilities and, secondly, to support the cultural programs they hope to present. With the notable exception of the Museum Wharf complex which now houses two museums in one building, there has been far too little cooperation among facilities planners as they compete for space and funds. For example, on Massachusetts' North Shore, facilities proposals have been developed and given initial funding in four communities that are within a half an hour's driving distance of one another. In the small town of Greenfield, three renovation projects are vying for local and federal support. And in Boston, two cultural titans, the Opera Company and the Music Hall, are seeking funds separately for major renovation projects.

And this disturbing lack of coordination and cooperation among facilities developers is not the exclusive problem of Massachusetts. According to the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, there are seven performance facilities development proposals in Fairfield County alone. Clearly, more communication and coordination among federal, state, and local funding and planning agencies can curb the rash development of duplicate facilities that a community may not be able to afford in the long run.

But in the few minutes that I have remaining, I want to touch on the most disturbing aspects of these recent Massachusetts developments. The first of these is a shocking lack of realistic, integrated long-range programmatic and financial planning. Too many facilities developers act as if their problems will be over as soon as the doors open. Unfortunately, this is usually when the real problems begin. Typically, capital funds are far easier to raise than operating funds, perhaps because of the permanence and tangible quality of a cultural landmark, perhaps too because of the aura of glamour that such plans evoke. At any rate, as any development officers in the audience will confirm, a successful capital fund drive temporarily dries up annual fund drive contributions for general operating support. And the managers of these new facilities will be caught in a double bind if they have not developed strong programs that will attract earned income.

This is a serious concern for us at the Massachusetts Arts Council because we are the state agency responsible for supporting these cultural programs in the public interest. Recently we have become involved with two excellent facilities renovation projects which are jeopardized by inadequate long-range planning. In one case, we have just awarded a special $10,000 technical assistance grant to a community cultural center which opened last fall in a beautifully renovated former vaudeville theatre. This superb facility is owned by the City of Boston, which financed the renovation with a creative package of federal development funds but has been slow to release the operating subsidy which is the life-blood of any non-profit facility. Because the Center had no cash flow, they had to cancel half of their ambitious first season, including appearances by such major dance companies as Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey. This entailed paying substantial contract cancellation fees to these companies and to local musicians, a cost which the Center could not afford because of the concurrent loss of earned income.

Another discouraging example of poor planning has emerged at the Worcester Mechanics Hall, a renovation of a lovely 19th-century concert hall which has won national architectural awards and was recently featured on the cover of Progressive Architecture. Unfortunately, the management has never developed a sound marketing strategy for attracting rentors to the hall. Their unrealistic fee scale does not cover the cost of simply opening the doors and turning on the lights, let alone the heat. At the Council's request, Mechanics Hall is developing a financial assistance proposal for a comprehensive study of marketing and rental policy.

On the bright side, the Council has also supported two commendable projects which examined programmatic, financial, and architectural issues before embarking on major capital development schemes. The Springfield Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs used Council financial assistance funds to conduct an audience survey before renovating the city's Symphony Hall. This foresight enabled them to document local demand for dance, opera, and theatre events which the original shallow stage could not accomodate. And the Lowell Preservation Commission in the country's first urban national park will receive Council technical assistance funds for a programmatic and architectural feasibility study of the renovation of an old downtown vaudeville theatre.

Too few facilities projects proceed this cautiously and in their haste to improve on the inadequate local facilities we surveyed, they are developing new facilities to meet their immediate and specific needs. This short-sightedness can only lead to more inflexible facilities of the type we surveyed and deplored. And I fear that in the long run, many of these will not meet the needs of performing companies and audiences whom they should serve.

Like Oregon, the Massachusetts Council is only beginning to consider how we can help our communities develop the best facilities possible. We hope that the State Legislature will see fit to pass our two facilities bills so that we can have more leverage in insisting on the careful planning which so many of our facilities sorely need. We also plan to expand our date base on performance facilities to forty-five new sites across New England and to computerize this data for the first time, in cooperation with the National Information Systems Project. For it is only through greater information and communication about performance facilities design, which a conference like this will certainly promote, that all of us can ensure the development of facilities that will be classics, working for their communities for years to come.